

Were You Born in a Barn?
Doorways
Larry Reimer
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The United Church of Gainesville

Matthew 21:28-32

I invite each of you to turn to someone by your side and ask them if they ever heard the words, “Were you born in a barn?” If so, who spoke them, and when, and why. Make sure both of you get to share your responses.

A few responses.

“Were you born in a barn?” is an interesting phrase. Kathy Funke told me she always wondered why her mother used it because obviously her mother must have known where she was born. I saw a cartoon with Joseph standing over a toddler Jesus in their living room. Stools were overturned. Toys were strewn everywhere, and the front door was wide open. Joseph says to the boy Jesus, “Just look at this mess. Were you born in a ba...? Oh, never mind.”

There are two theories on the origin of the saying. First is from a blog by Amanda Thomson who suggests that it was originally, “Were you born in Bardney?” which is the site of the Topholme Abbey in Lincolnshire, England. When the King Saint Oswald was killed, his followers tried to bring his bones to the abbey, but the Monks kept the doors shut. During the night a pillar of light shone from the cart of bones, convincing the monks that Oswald was indeed a saint and that they were wrong to shut out the cart with his bones. Legend has it that forever after, the monks left their gates wide open. The phrase that developed, “Do you come from Bardney?” means that you have left a door open.

It’s also possible that the phrase’s original question was actually, “Were you born in a barn?” It was a custom to leave barn doors open in the early morning to let the cows out to pasture and they stayed open all day until the cows were herded back to the barn for milking again in the early evening.

However, as fascinating as all of this discussion is, I used the phrase today because it related to doors, and to me a sense of shutting a door behind you means making a commitment. I am talking about the difficult task in life of making a decision, closing the door behind us, and following through rather than forever keeping our options open.

Listen to this parable of Jesus from Matthew 21:28-31 as presented in Robert Funk and Roy Hoover’s, [The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus](#) by the Jesus Seminar.

Here’s the setting. Jesus has just been challenged by the chief priests and elders about his authority. Jesus asks them in turn a

question about the authority of John the Baptist, to which they answer, "We don't know."

So Jesus asks this question which they have to answer.

Now what do you think? A man had two children. He went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today."

He responded, "I'm your man, sir," but he didn't move.

Then he went to the second and said the same thing.

He responded, "I don't want to," but later on he thought better of it and went (to work).

Which of the two did what the father wanted?

They (the chief priests and elders) said, "The second."

Jesus said to them, "I swear to you, the toll collectors and prostitutes will get into God's domain, but you will not."

This parable is dangerous in that it's easy to oversimplify it and make it self-serving. You could use this as a biblical threat to get your teenager to clean their room.

It's also easy to make this parable anti-Semitic. One could read this and believe that Jesus was accusing the Jews as the ones who claimed to have said yes to God, but when it came down to following him, they didn't show up.

But parables are never as easy as they first seem. For example, if this were simple common sense, then the best option would have been to have a son who both said yes AND went to work in the garden. Having a son who says no and shows up is still a problem in a Galilean household. Respect of parents is very important. So we accept as the best option the sullen son who says no and then changes his mind.

The first way to understand this parable is to recognize that in Matthew's gospel there is an ongoing theme which emphasizes doing over talking. It's Matthew who in chapter 7:21 has Jesus say, "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Mother/Father in heaven." Jesus goes on to say that the person who hears his words and acts on them will be like a house built on a rock. It's also Matthew who says in chapter 25 that those who are welcomed into God's realm are those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned. For the Jesus of Matthew's gospel, it's not what you say, or even the purity of your beliefs, but what you do that matters.

On this, the day of our congregational meeting, I share this story, and the barn door story, because we need to remember the importance of commitment and follow through both in this church and in our lives.

Consider the church. I believe this church appeals to most of us for two primary reasons. First is that we are an open-minded, non-judgmental community. We accept each other as we are and believe that God does the same. The second appealing element of this church is that we are a people who are doers and not just hearers of the word. This is a church that walks the walk of service and justice.

Well mostly. Sometimes, I'm afraid, the idea that we're all accepted as we are runs up against the call to actually do something with our faith. I mean if we're accepted not doing much of anything in the way of service to the church or the world, then why bother making the effort of commitment?

In many ways we are a people who like to keep that barn door of options open and not settle into or sign up for significant commitments. In this church, our projects, programs, even board activities usually work out in the end, but not without last minute scrambling and significant wear and tear on the group leaders. Sometimes the vineyard we said yes to and then didn't show up for doesn't work out on its own, and either a leader or someone in need is left high and dry.

The reality is that we can't always be both a laid back, play it by ear, keep our options open church and at the same time be a people who walk the walk, whether it's teaching church school, volunteering for IHN, showing up for youth group or simply following through with all the sessions you signed up for with a small group.

The importance of making commitments and following through is a simple reminder for each of us, yet I know it's hard. I've been on enough community or denominational boards where I'm quite frankly ambivalent about how much I want to do. I've found myself acting like a kid who forgot his homework when the chair asks for volunteers - you know how it goes, trying not to be noticed, making no eye contact.

The best and most productive boards and programs in this church are the ones filled with people who are excited to be there. The leaders have decided to run these programs well. The members have committed to making this a good experience, and everyone understands that this board has a noble and important mission. So I remind everyone here: Find an arena where you have energy, where you will show up at the vineyard.

Being a positive and committed part of this church is crucial to your personal spiritual health and our community spiritual wellbeing. All it takes for the folks on the front lines of this church to lose their own vision is to turn around and see no one behind them.

But on a much deeper level, Matthew indicates that there is a greater responsibility thrown upon those of us who have said yes at sometime to the truth, as Dag Hammarskjöld said, that existence is meaningful and that life, in self-surrender, has a goal. We may not realize it, but in joining this church we have given ourselves the greater responsibility of having said yes to a call. By saying yes to our belief in the power of spiritual community, yes to an open and affirming acceptance of a God, however known, yes that we will act in Christian concern for the welfare of all people, we have said yes to a call to work in the vineyard. And that's just the beginning.

By saying yes to following the way of Jesus in personal involvement with each other, we have said yes to the least of our sisters and brothers

which I am pretty sure doesn't mean letting them languish on the streets, in jail, or in underfunded schools, even if that does mean paying a fair share of taxes. We have said yes to the prince of peace who says that we are to love even our enemies, which I am pretty sure doesn't mean killing them either through lethal injection or as the collateral damage of wars.

Matthew has Jesus say that whenever you feed, clothe, visit, house, bless the least of your sisters and brothers you do it to me. When we say yes that the best and brightest as well as the least and most confused are to be cherished as children of God, for they are the heart of God here on earth, we are shutting that barn door behind us to casually dismissing others when they don't suit our needs.

I believe that the way we profess our faith in this church, without creed, without hypocrisy, without judgment is wonderful. I also believe that it is our responsibility then to live that open faith with a commitment that heals rather than hurts the human heart.

When our belief in love and care are put to the test, that's exactly when I believe God shakes us awake when we would just as soon stay asleep in and says, "This is the day I need you in the vineyard."

This story isn't about Jews who didn't accept Jesus. It's about any time we do a lot of talking and not a lot of walking. That can be us just as easily as it can be the folks who raise their hands in the air and sing over and over again how they love Jesus. It can be us just as easily as it can be the folks who kneel and say all the creeds and sing all the chants by heart.

So let each of us look into our hearts and ask where it is we need to close that barn door behind us, that door of too much intellectual debate, too much emotional self-centeredness, and too much moral laziness. Let us listen to the call to find our place in the work of the holy, in this church, in our lives, and in our world, and do it. Let us listen to the call to go forward through these doors before us, doors of sunrise, doors of faithful growth, doors of care and connection, doors of childlike wonder, and doors of God's re-creation. Let us listen, close the door behind us, rise up and open the door of commitment that stands before us. In so doing we enter a realm of God where existence is meaningful and life in giving, has a goal.

Let us pray:

We pray for the moments of commitment in our lives, when we stand before the river we must cross, when we dream, like Jacob of a ladder full of angels, who reach down to us and say, "Come, climb with us and let us seek a better world." God what is the ladder you call us to climb today? Give us a vision in prayer.

We pray for moments of commitment in our lives when like Sarah, long forgotten dreams come true, and our friends are so thrilled and reach out to us and say, "Come, dance with us and live a richer, more

joyful life.” God, where do you call us to dance today? Give us a vision in prayer.

And as we pray for our visions, we pray also this church today, that it may be a beacon of peace in a darkened land.

Amen.